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Legally Speaking -- Decoder Ring

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The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund Joins Forces with Libraries

Column Editor: **Jerry Spiller** (Art Institute of Charleston) <yeri.spiller@gmail.com>

The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (CBLDF) is on the front lines of fighting for the First Amendment. The comics advocacy and anti-censorship group has recently been involved in efforts to restore **John Green's** *Paper Towns* to a reading list in Florida,¹ urging the South Carolina legislature to reconsider budget cuts over last year's choice of **Alison Bechdel's** *Fun Home*,² and participating in numerous auctions, fundraisers, and educational events.

CBLDF has been gearing up programs for the fall with its "Back to School with Comic Books" series. Just in time for the start of the school year and Banned Book Week events in late September, the group's **Betsy Gomez** announced the release of the *CBLDF Banned Books Week Handbook*.³ This resource for libraries, educators, and retailers is a free download hosted on issuu.com and provides "the scoop about banned comics, how to report and fight censorship, and how to make a celebration of Banned Books Week in your community."⁴ In addition to the free handbook downloads, you can purchase Banned Book Week kits with print versions of the handbook plus stickers and buttons.

The CBLDF also provides some wonderful online discussion guides focused on frequently challenged comics, including *Fun Home*, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, *Watchmen*, *Maus*, *Persepolis*, and *Pride of Baghdad*. These materials are an invaluable resource for librarians working on classes and events dealing with censorship (or simply for comics or general media-literacy programming). Each guide contains a synopsis, a breakdown of the work's major themes, the reasons it is often challenged, suggested age ranges for readers, and discussion questions and activities. The guides are available as free PDF downloads from cblfd.org.⁵ They look like they'll be useful regardless of the time of year. The *Raising a Reader* guide,⁶ aimed at very young readers and timed for release with Free Comic Book Day in May, looks like a boon for early primary school and public libraries throughout the calendar.

This is well-coordinated bunch of materials from **Gomez** and the CBLDF crew. **Gomez** also furthered the collaboration by inviting libraries to contact

her with their planned activities, and encouraged planners to register their events with the ALA for inclusion on BannedBookWeek.org as well.⁷

Gomez has also uploaded *Working with Libraries! A Handbook for Comics Creators* to issuu.com.⁸ The guide is aimed at helping comic writers and artists understand library programs, events, and collection development practices. The work features an introduction by **Harvey Award** winner **Jeff Smith**, creator of *Bone* from **Scholastic** and himself a CBLDF Board member.

In August CBLDF announced the addition of UNLV Curriculum Materials librarian **Katherine Keller** to its Board of Directors. In addition to her prominent librarian role doing outreach and instruction in Las Vegas, **Keller** is the co-founder of *Sequential Tart*, a long-running Webzine focusing on women's issues in comics and pop culture. **Gomez** recently relayed **Keller's** feelings on her new position on the CBLDF site: "Given the experience and expertise of the current Board, I am both humbled and excited about being able to bring what I know about comics retailing, libraries, and education to such a group."⁹ It would be easy to think **Keller's** experience with organizing outreach programs also had something to do with the group's well-timed efforts at the beginning of the academic year.

Keller was involved in fundraising for CBLDF's support of comics retailer **Gordon Lee** against charges of distributing harmful materials to minors in 2007 and of manga reader **Christopher Handley's** prosecution for possession of objectionable materials in 2009. **Lee's** charges were dropped but he died after having a series of strokes in 2013.¹⁰ **Handley** was pressured into a guilty plea and served six months in prison, followed by years of supervised release and probation, due to his possession of seven particular books in a broad collection of manga that numbered in the thousands of volumes.¹¹

Full disclosure: I'm a card-carrying member of the CBLDF and proudly wear my "I Read Banned Comics" membership t-shirt to any event I can.

Download those guides and use them year round. 🐱



Endnotes

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